

THE HARM PRINCIPLE

As we have seen, developments in genetic technology have enabled us to prevent or cure a series of genetic disabilities. It is likely that the scope of our technology will increase. Is this something we should welcome, or are there aspects to such developments that we might want to prevent? Or should we give full freedom to people who want to pursue the genetic horizon? Here is a straightforward principle to keep in mind:

The Harm Principle:

The only purpose for which power can be exercised against someone's will is to prevent harm to others.

We have talked about two forms of harm in relation to medical choices:

1. The harm associated with *what we owe to other people*.
2. The harm associated with *making the world a worse place than necessary*.

How can these two forms of harm be brought to bear on the issue of regulating *genetic* choices?

MEDICAL CHOICES VS. ENHANCEMENTS

Many people think that it's justifiable to make genetic choices only if they are *medical*. That is, they consider it acceptable to utilize genetic technology for the purpose of having a child that is healthy and able-bodied, but not to promote non-medical *enhancements*.

Problem: Why do we take it to be desirable to use genetic technology for the purpose of promoting health? Because sickness and disability are taken to be obstacles to human flourishing. But if so, can't the same argument be applied to enhancements? That is, can it not be argued that failing to enhance someone's genes provides an obstacle to flourishing?

Reply: Not necessarily. We must distinguish between *harm* and *mere non-benefit*. If my employer raises me salary to 200,000, then I'll be greatly benefited, given my needs. However, if he fails to do so, I will not be harmed. But now compare this to a scenario in which he fires me. In that scenario, he deprives me of something that I *need*, namely an income by way of which I can provide for me and my family. And only if I'm deprived of a need can I claim to be harmed.

Counter-reply: Sure, but does the distinction between harm and mere non-benefit really coincide with any robust distinction between medical and non-medical choices? If it does, it seems that they both vary with our *expectations*. Today, we expect a lot more from life in terms of both happiness, leisure and health than people could reasonably do only a hundred years back. So, perhaps today's enhancements will become tomorrow's medical choices?

TWO FURTHER WORRIES

What this suggests is that, even if there *is* a distinction between medical choices and enhancements, this distinction is likely to vary with cultural and societal developments and expectations, and hence not provide a very robust benchmark for the regulation of genetic choices. So, what are some concerns relevant to the latter?

- **Inequality.** Unless we regulate accessibility to options for genetic choices, rich people will buy more enhancements, and thereby amplify as well as replicate inequalities over time, both nationally and internationally.
- **Futility.** If the advantages of enhancements are *positional*—i.e., if the only reason they're better is because no one else has them—then widespread enhancement will be futile. As economist Fred Hirsch puts it: "If every one stands on tiptoe, no one sees better."

HUMAN NATURE

There is a further and somewhat more philosophical worry, which is that genetic enhancements would, somehow, constitute a threat to the very core of human nature, or to “human dignity.”

Problem: What is this core of human nature supposed to consist in? Interestingly, a lot of the qualities that people tend to quote, such as consciousness, cooperation, and altruism, are not unique to humans. More than that, understood as biological creatures with an evolutionary history, it seems likely that some aspects of our nature—such as aggression, xenophobia, etc.—are of a kind that we would want (and already try) to *counteract* rather than preserve.

So, as Glover points out, the issue does not seem to be so much to preserve a core of human nature as to preserve qualities that we deem *valuable*. So what’s valuable about a human life?

HUMAN FLOURISHING

This brings us back to the issue of harm and its opposite: human flourishing. What constitutes human flourishing? There are two interconnected traditions in philosophy with respect to this question:

Normal Functioning and Human Goods

A ‘Normal Functioning’ Account

One way to understand human flourishing is in terms of normal functioning, i.e., in terms of having the physical and psychological functions possessed by a ‘normal’ member of one’s species.

Problem #1: People with disabilities (by virtue of which they deviate from the statistical norm) need not be unhappy, and perfectly ‘normal’ people need not be happy. In other words, there does not seem to be a necessary connection between normality and flourishing.

Problem #2: The account seems to rule out the possibility that there may be aspects to a flourishing life that go *beyond* the normal, perhaps because we have not discovered these aspects yet. After all, why should we assume that only those things that make up a statistically normal human life should make up the paradigm of flourishing?

A Human Goods Account

One way to avoid these problems is to not define flourishing in terms of any statistical norm, but rather directly in terms of the goods we take are central to a good life, such as health, nourishment, shelter, sex, mobility, and an ability to reason—whether or not people normally have access to these things.

Moreover, we may leave room for an open-ended list of such human goods, to reflect the fact that there might be goods that are still to be discovered.

Glover: When thinking about what constitutes human flourishing we need to (a) take into account how the life seems to the person living it, (b) leave room for human goods still to be discovered, (c) keep in mind that the most appropriate action to take sometimes is to introduce people to the desires associated with a rich and fulfilling life.

Happiness

Traditional Utilitarianism

The main alternative to the accounts on the left is an account of human flourishing in terms of happiness. In its most crudest form, human flourishing would consist in the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain.

Problem: This seems to yield a very *limited* account of human flourishing. To see why, consider the following:

Imagine a machine that can stimulate the brain to give any set of experiences, and that can be adapted to the tastes of different people. As a result, people can be offered a lifetime of experiences of intense pleasure and no pain. Would you be willing to be hooked up to such a machine for the rest of your life (assuming perfect technology)?

Desire-Satisfaction Utilitarianism

Another way to understand human flourishing is in terms of the satisfaction of desires. The more people’s desires are satisfied, the greater their happiness, and the more flourishing a world.

Problem #1: It seems likely that there are certain desires we ought *not* to fulfill (e.g., those pertaining to psychological deviance). So, desire satisfaction is *not* always a good thing.

Problem #2: Certain desires are formed against the background of *impoverished preferences*, e.g., due to poverty and destitution. Satisfying those desires does not seem to make for a more flourishing world.